

INFORMATION SHEET NO 27

The Court Post Office

Early days

The origin of the Royal Mail itself lies in the household service provided by the Royal Messengers to carry to and from the Court letters and writs on behalf of the sovereign. In England, its history began as far back as the so-called dark ages when, before unification of the country under a single monarch, it formed individual kingdoms. Whenever the ruler had a need to send a letter within or beyond his kingdom, it was sped on its way by a Royal Messenger of the Court. The first Court Post, an official of the Royal household appointed by Letters Patent, was Robert Gascoigne, appointed in 1565 by Queen Elizabeth I (see appendix). The office was abolished in 1812 during the Regency of the Prince of Wales (later George IV), upon the death of the last holder, Henry Penton Junior. His Patent, granted in 1761, is held in the Post Office's archives (Post 67/48).

The reign of Queen Victoria

From the beginning of the state postal service in 1635 (when the Royal Mail service was opened to use by the public) until the postal reform of 1840, the sovereign's letters were carried post-free by the Post Office. On 10 January 1840, however, as an example to Members of Parliament, who lost their franking privilege upon the introduction of Uniform Penny Postage, Queen Victoria voluntarily surrendered her right to Royal franking. Henceforth, letters from the Queen and her Court bore postage stamps, just like those of her subjects, although Royal Messengers continued to carry certain letters by hand.

From 1870, when it took over the private telegraph companies, the Post Office continued to provide the services of George Warren, the Court Telegraphist. Various hand date stamps were provided for his use, for telegraph purposes only. In 1877, at the request of the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, a sub-post office was established at Sandringham House, his private country residence.

No special postal facilities were provided for the Court's mail, however, until January 1897, when a Court post office was opened at Osborne House for the convenience of the Queen's household and to relieve the Sergeant Footman of what had amounted to the duties of a sub-postmaster. At that time the number of letters for Osborne was about 1000 a week each way and the number of postage stamps sold averaged about £6 a week. During the Queen's stay at Osborne, about fourteen weeks in the year, the mail cart from Cowes to Ryde called every evening to collect the Queen's private pouch. Osborne House was one of the favourite residences of Queen Victoria and was extensively used as a shore base for Royal yachts. It was presented to the nation by Edward VII in 1902. The Court Telegraphist acted as Clerk-in-Charge of the Court post

office opened in 1897 and a special hand date stamp was issued for his use, the first to be issued for postal use at the Court. This first Court post office was open from 1 January to 15 February 1897, when the Court moved to Windsor.

At this time Windsor Castle and not Buckingham Palace was the State residence of the monarch, and in 1898 the Master of the Household provided an office there where the Court Telegraphist could carry out certain postal duties such as receiving parcels and selling postal orders and stamps. By 1904 a Court post office, open when the Court was in residence, had been established.

Edward VII and the restoration of Royal franking

Upon his accession in January 1901 Royal franking was restored by Edward VII, and by 2 May he had approved a design for a personal franking hand stamp incorporating his cypher. The first stamp, made of steel, was completed by 16 May and sent to the King in a special box (see fig 1). By the end of the year a total of six such stamps had been issued: two for the King, one to be kept at Sandringham, and three for the Court Telegraphist.



Fig 1 Edward VII franking stamp (1901)

A seventh Royal franking stamp was issued in 1903 for use on the Queen's correspondence whenever the Court was divided. This followed an unfortunate incident earlier in the year when a registered letter sent by the Queen from Balmoral Castle when The King was absent, and had taken his franking stamp with him, had been surcharged upon delivery.

In August the Treasury declared that the Royal franking privilege was not to be extended beyond His Majesty's personal correspondence; letters sent by his personal staff at Windsor Castle, Buckingham Palace, Sandringham House, Balmoral Castle and Cowes (the Royal yacht); and the business correspondence of the Privy Purse Office and the three Household departments, ie those of the Lord Steward, the Master of the Horse and the Lord Chamberlain.

Early in August the Post Office produced three rubber hand stamps, numbered 1, 2 and 3, for use by the three Household departments concerned. Before they could be issued, however, and because the three departments had objected strongly to using impersonal, numbered stamps, the Secretary to the Board of the Green Cloth of the Lord Steward's Department suggested a new design. This featured the initials LS for the office of the Lord Steward, MH for that of the Master of the Horse, and LC for that of the Lord Chamberlain. These, and not the three originally produced, were issued on 28 August.

By the end of October similar stamps had been issued to the office of the Privy Purse, Buckingham Palace, and at Windsor; the Master of the Horse, Royal Mews SW, and the Royal Mews, Windsor; and to the office of the Lord Chamberlain, St James's Palace. Others were issued to the five departments of the Lord Steward Buckingham Palace, bearing the initials BGC, MH, PH, RL and RC.

The Privy Purse, Buckingham Palace stamp, and presumably that issued for Windsor, was used on correspondence from the Keeper of the Privy Purse, the Assistant Keeper, the Secretary and the Assistant Secretary to the Privy Purse, the Personal Secretary to the King and the Assistant Private Secretaries. The Master of the Horse, Royal Mews SW stamp was used by the Master of the Horse; the Crown Equerry and Secretary; the Superintendent of the Royal Mews, London; and the Accountant, Clerk and Assessor of Taxes. The stamp Master of the Horse, Royal Mews, Windsor was used on correspondence from

the Superintendent of the Royal Mews, Windsor. The stamp Lord Chamberlain, St James's Palace was used by the Lord Chamberlain, Comptroller and Chief Clerk. Of the initialled stamps issued to the various offices of the Lord Steward, Buckingham Palace, that carrying the initials BGC was used by the Lord Steward, Treasurer and Comptroller of the Household, and Acting Secretary and Clerk to the Board of Green Cloth. That with the initials MH was used by the Master of the Household and his Deputy, and the Clerk Comptroller. The PH stamp was used by the Paymaster of the Household, the RL stamp by the Royal Laundry (responsible for all machinery and electricity), and the RC stamp used on correspondence from the Gentlemen of the Royal Cellars. All these rubber certifying stamps were oval in shape and featured a crown in their design.



Fig 2 Royal Household - 'Lord Steward MH' (1901)

By November 1902 postage stamps overprinted RH Official had also been supplied by the Post Office for use on correspondence from certain outlying offices connected with the Royal Household, ie those of the Examiner of Plays, the Inspector of the Palace of Holyroodhouse, the Housekeepers at Windsor Castle and Frogmore, Gentlemen of the Royal Cellars, the Paymaster of Households and the Royal Laundry, Richmond.

Under these arrangements for the restoration of Royal franking and to indicate that no postage was due to be paid on correspondence from The King and the Royal Household which bore autographed signatures, or impressions of franking or certifying stamps, post offices regularly despatching such mail were provided with Official Paid hand stamps.

The first of these were issued to the Head Post Office at Windsor and to the RSO at Sandringham on 28 August 1901, and bore the legend Official Paid, the name of the office and spaces for the date and time of posting. These date stamps were to be applied on all properly certified correspondence from the Court when in residence. Instructions issued to postmasters in August stated that they were to use their Official Paid stamp on any letters sent by the King which bore his signature in the corner or an impression of his personal stamp, or were certified by the autograph signature of Sir Francis Knollys (the King's Personal Secretary) or Sir D Probyn (Keeper of the Privy Purse), and that they should keep a record of every letter so stamped and forwarded free of postage. If they had no Official Paid stamp they were to pre-pay, by postage stamps, any letters certified as above, unless they were addressed to Government Offices, when they were to be sent forward 'untaxed with the Official Letters'. Postmasters were to enter details of the value of any postage stamps they affixed to letters, on a special form, forwarding this to the General Post Office in London as soon as The King had left, for re-imbusement.

In the Autumn of 1901 the Court was due to move to Balmoral Castle and arrangements originally proposed by the Post Office for dealing with its outward letters included the supply to the Sergeant Footman of a credit stock of postage stamps from Aberdeen. The Surveyor of posts in Scotland, however, suggested that a simpler procedure would be to issue the Comptroller of the Household with a special hand-stamp, with which to frank the letters. London did not favour his proposal at first but, soon after, The King's Personal Secretary also sought some alternative to the affixing of postage stamps on the Court's letters at the Castle. And so it was decided to issue a special Official Paid hand date stamp, with a crown in its design, to the Court Telegraphist, for use at Balmoral and other Royal residences. On 20 September, pending the issue of the new stamp, a spare London Official Paid stamp was sent to the Court Telegraphist at Balmoral. The special 'crown' stamp, replacing the borrowed London stamp, was sent to him on 26 September.

Establishment of a permanent Court Post Office at Buckingham Palace 1902

During the reign of Queen Victoria Buckingham Palace was little used as an official residence. On 14 April 1902, however, a Court post office was established at Buckingham Palace and, unlike the other Court post offices, remained open all the year round. This, too, was placed under the supervision of the Court Telegraphist, J M Hiley. In 1906, at the express wish of Edward VII, Hiley was promoted to the rank of Court Postmaster - an office which remains to this day.

George V

By 1911 a Court post office, again only open when the Court was in residence, had been opened at the Palace of Holyroodhouse. Another office was similarly opened at the Royal Pavilion, Aldershot - a wooden building, since demolished, used by the Royal Family when at Aldershot for military occasions. During annual visits to the Cowes Regatta a court post office was set up on the Royal Yacht.

The four franking stamps provided in September 1910 for the use of George V (fig 4) were very similar in design to the circular stamps provided for Edward VII.

Edward VIII

The design of the eight square franking stamps provided for Edward VIII in February 1936, however, included the addition of the initial I in his cypher, denoting that he was Edward Rex Imperator - Emperor of India (see fig 3). Unlike those provided for earlier and later monarchs upon their accession to the throne, the design of Edward 'VIII's' franking stamp, based on a sketch he produced early in his reign, did not include a crown. Six franking stamps were supplied for his use at Sandringham, Windsor, Balmoral and, at his wish, Fort Belvedere; others were provided for his use when travelling and as a reserve. Two more were provided to the Court Post Office at Buckingham Palace.



Fig 3 Edward VIII's franking stamp (1936)

George VI

The franking stamps provided to George VI in January 1937, soon after his accession to the throne, although circular in shape and including a crown in their design, were very similar to those designed by Edward VIII a year before. Like those of Edward VIII they included the initial I in the Royal cypher. Eleven were provided for his use. The first to be provided by the Post Office had been considered too small by The King, although he was pleased with the design proposed. A year later, however, in June 1938, The King expressed concern that the Royal cypher depicted in his franking stamps was not the correct one and asked that new stamps of the correct design be provided. These were issued on 28 June.

In July 1936 Edward VIII, with his active interest in flying, had introduced The King's Flight. In 1942 because of the war, it was disbanded but was reformed again in 1946.

During the war, between 26 March and 18 April 1940, a special franking stamp was used on personal letters of appreciation from Queen Elizabeth to those who, during the early days of the war, had opened their homes to evacuees from London and other large Towns.

The present reign

In 1953, following the accession of HM The Queen in 1952, The King's Flight became The Queen's Flight. It sometimes carries Court mail, which is then franked with a special 'Queen's Flight' hand stamp (see fig 4).



Fig 4 The 'Queen's Flight' franking stamp (current)

On the afternoon of 20 August 1955, for four hours only, a temporary post office was opened at Abergeldie Castle, where cards and letters bearing its special date stamp Abergeldie Castle Aberdeen 20 Au 55 were sold by Prince Charles and Princess Anne, raising over £2,000 in aid of Crathie Church, where HM The Queen worships when she returns to Balmoral.

Today, the Court Post Office, headquartered in Buckingham Palace and under the care of the Court Postmaster, still provides postal and telephone facilities for the Court and the Royal Household at Buckingham Palace. The Court post offices at Buckingham Palace and at Windsor Castle are open all the year round. Those at the other Royal residences - Balmoral, Holyroodhouse and Sandringham - are set up by the Court Postmaster only when the Court is in residence.

Correspondence sent from the Court Post Office at Buckingham Palace bearing the Queen's franking stamp, or the certifying stamps of the Royal Household offices situated in Buckingham Palace, is date-stamped with the London SW1 Official Paid stamp. Certified correspondence sent from offices of the Royal Household is similarly date-stamped. Private letters from certain Royal residences, although not eligible for Royal franking, sometimes carry, in addition to postage stamps, hand-struck cachets denoting their origin.



Fig 5 EIR franking stamp (current)



Fig 6 Cancellation stamp, Holyroodhouse (current)

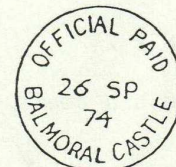


Fig 7 'Official Paid', Balmoral (current)

J F
Post Office Archives

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/APPENDIX A

LIST OF HOLDERS OF THE ROYAL LETTERS PATENT "COURT POST"

Date of appointment

1565, Aug 5	Robert Gascoigne
1603, Apr 8	Rowland White
1625	Anthony Buckbury
1636	Richard Poole
1661, Oct	Thomas Parnell
1666, May 12	Percival Stanney
1684, June 23	Sir Thomas Dereham
1697, Dec 4	William Van Huls
1700, Dec 7	James De Cardonnell
1705, July 23	Henry Andrews
1715, Mar 25	Dennis Bond
1745, Apr 21	Henry Penton
1761, Mar 24	Henry Penton, Junior*

* Upon his death on 15 January 1812 the Office was abolished